

Revving Up for the Year of Science

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Organisms from Molecules to the Environment
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Revving Up for the Year of Science

The year 2009 has been designated the Year of Science (www.yearofscience2009.org). The Coalition on the Public Understanding of Science (COPUS) and AIBS, together with the Geological Society of America, the National Science Teachers Association, and the University of California Museum of Paleontology (home of the new Understanding Science Web site; see p. 91)—are fully engaged in the effort to attain the goal of the Year of Science: to empower Americans “to appreciate the pragmatic outcomes of science, to distinguish science from non-science, and to participate in social discourse that provides insight into the nature of science” (COPUS, www.copusproject.org/rationale.php).

The celebration is timed to coincide with many seminal scientific anniversaries, most notably the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, who by introducing the concepts of natural selection and evolution by common descent laid the foundation for essentially all of modern biology. Year of Science activities will span the full range of science and technology and involve a remarkable collaboration of 450 professional scientific societies, universities, science teachers' associations, government laboratories, community groups, museums, and businesses.

Let me point out, however, that 2009 is cause for celebration for other reasons. It is, for example, the 800th anniversary of the founding of Cambridge University, the 250th anniversary of the birth of Scottish poet Robert Burns, and the 50th anniversaries of Hawaiian statehood and the Chevy El Camino. I mention these dates not to encourage a 12-month frenzy of parties, but rather to point out that public *understanding* of science begins with public *awareness* of science, and 2009 is not atypical in providing a great deal of competition for the attention of the American public. For many people, the anniversary of the Chevy El Camino will seem more relevant than any of the year's scientific anniversaries.

It is the burden of the scientific community to attract notice above the din. Scientific information has never been more readily accessible: Web sites, podcasts, blogs, cable shows, and YouTube videos complement the more traditional sources of information, such as radio, magazines, and books. Unfortunately, scientific information competes, on a dismayingly level playing field, not only with more approachable nonscience enterprises but also with misinformation and pseudoscience, which are not always immediately recognizable as such.

So here is our challenge: a single Year of Science will not transform the American public, but if the effort in 2009 boosts public awareness of science, it can be a launching point for a long-term initiative to alert, inform, and educate the public about the value of scientific understanding in everyone's life. Thus, the year 2010—incidentally, the 125th anniversary of the invention of the Daimler-Maybach automobile internal combustion engine—and the years that follow should all be years for the public understanding of science, as well as for science's understanding of its public role. AIBS and COPUS will continue to be a part of the efforts to keep the conversation going.

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